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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAMAKO 001389

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [ML](#)
SUBJECT: HOSTAGE RELEASE RUMORED FOR DECEMBER

REF: A. BAMAKO 01356
[B](#). BAMAKO 01222
[C](#). BAMAKO 01364

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Summary: Northern Malian sources have reported that Tuareg bandit Ibrahim Bahanga is preparing to release the hostages on December 8, while contacts within Algeria's Embassy to Mali reported a possible December 14 liberation date. While lacking specifics, recent discussions about the hostage crisis with actors from three very different vantage points - the Governor of Gao, the spokesman of the Tuareg rebel Alliance for Democracy and Change, and the Regional Director of the International Committee of the Red Cross - provided further indications that Mali and Algeria believe they have the situation under control. End Summary.

Movement on the Hostage Front?

2.(C) On December 4, Dayti ag Sidamou, the National Assembly Deputy from Tessalit and the "Finance Secretary" of the Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC), told the Embassy that Ibrahim Bahanga could liberate the hostages he has held for more than three months as early as December 8. Ag Sidamou is currently in the northern border town of In Khalil and indicated that Bahanga said he would not be able to assemble all of the hostages, who are reportedly dispersed throughout northern Mali and elsewhere, prior to this date. A contact with ties to the Algerian Embassy in Bamako reported that the Algerians are also envisioning a December release date, but expect it to come later, on the 14th.

3.(C) Ag Sidamou reported that morale among Bahanga's Malian associates is low. One contingent of Bahanga's group reportedly detained a caravan of three vehicles transporting drugs between Tin-essako and Tinzawaten during the weekend of December 1-2, and are attempting to extort money from the traffickers. Negotiations between Bahanga's group and the owner of the vehicles, identified only as a Tuareg Iforas named "Ati" from Tinzawaten, are currently underway.

4.(C) Ag Sidamou also stated that Algerian Arabs and Tuaregs believed to have been involved in the Nov. 8-9 rocket propelled grenade attack against an Algerian military plane in the south-eastern Algerian city of Djanet recently appeared in northern Mali in the region of Timitrine, about 200 KM from In Khalil. An ethnic Tuareg customs officer based in Tessalit provided a similar report. Both contacts expressed concerns about the intentions of these individuals.

The Governor of Gao, Algiers and the Gandakoy

5.(C) The Governor of Gao, Col. Ahmed Baba Toure, traveled to Algiers with the Governors of Kidal and Timbuktu and Minister of Territorial Administration Kafouguna Kone a few days in advance of President Amadou Toumani Toure's November 24-25 meetings with his Algerian counterpart. Col. Toure told the Ambassador on November 29 that his role in Algiers was not to help negotiate the release of the hostages but rather to revive cross-border cooperation between local officials in northern Mali and southern Algeria. He said the Governors of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu had invited Governors from southern Algeria to attend a meeting in Kidal in February 2008 to improve security coordination and strengthen commercial and cultural linkages.

6.(C) Although Gov. Toure did not participate in the hostage negotiations in Algiers, he speculated that Bahanga may be using the strategy employed by the GSPC during the 2003 hostage crisis involving a group of German tourists. Gov. Toure was one of the Malian officials who negotiated with the GSPC for the release of the German hostages. He said that, like the GSPC in 2003, Bahanga likely passed hostages off to other warlords in Mali, Niger and Chad for safe keeping.

7.(C) The Governor downplayed the recent assassination plot against him by alleged members of the Gandakoy militia in Gao (ref A). Prior to Governor Toure's meeting with the Ambassador, a member of President Toure's entourage told the Embassy that the Governor was afraid to return to Gao and had refused to use the official vehicle at his disposition, preferring instead to drive himself around Bamako in a small Volkswagen to avoid drawing attention. While the Governor was indeed driving his own Volkswagen, he told the Ambassador

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that he was relatively unconcerned by the plot, described the threat as overblown, and reported no security concerns for the Gao region. Interestingly, however, his travel schedule, which involves visits to France and Niger, will keep him out of Gao for much of the next two months.

Tuareg Leaders Fail to Find Bahanga

8.(C) On November 29 ADC spokesman and National Assembly Deputy Ahmada ag Bibi returned from Kidal, having failed to establish contact with Bahanga. Ag Bibi and the National Assembly Deputy from Kidal, Alghabass Intallah, traveled to Kidal in mid-October as part of a self-appointed negotiating team composed of local Tuareg leaders (ref B). While they were unable to speak directly with Bahanga, ag Bibi and Intallah did meet with some of his associates. Ag Bibi told the Embassy on November 30 that he believed Algeria prevented members of his delegation from speaking face-to-face with Bahanga.

Mali Rebuffs Offer From ICRC

9.(C) On December 3, Juan Coderque, new chief of the Dakar-based Regional Delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), told the Embassy that the Malian government had rebuffed an offer from the ICRC to establish contact with the Malian hostages. Mali said ICRC assistance was not needed as negotiations for the hostages' release were already underway. Although Coderque intended to discuss the hostages' whereabouts with the Algerian Ambassador to Mali while in Bamako, a last minute scheduling conflict forced the Algerian Ambassador to cancel. Coderque said he had heard the same rumors as others in Bamako that the hostages may be scattered throughout northern Mali, Niger and Chad. He questioned, however, reports that Bahanga handed some of his hostages over to the Mouvement des

Nigériens pour la Justice (MNJ) as the hostage numbers reported to the ICRC by the MNJ have not changed since the Malian hostage crisis began in August.

Comment: Thanks, But No Thanks

10.(C) ICRC involvement could have increased pressure on Bahanga, as the ICRC was prepared to demand access to the hostages to assess their condition. Mali's decision to decline the ICRC offer, and the Tuareg delegation's inability to even speak with Bahanga, is in line with what appears to be a concerted effort by Mali and Algeria to keep negotiations with Bahanga largely in-house. It also suggests that Mali remains willing to defer to Algeria to defuse the crisis. News from ag Sidamou that Bahanga is collecting the hostages is encouraging, and tracks somewhat with prior reports that one factor blocking an earlier release was the logistical challenge of getting them all back on Malian soil (ref C).
McCulley